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Reverend John Chamberlain: An Unheard Story of a Baptist Missionary in 19th CE Bengal

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Abstract:

Reverend John Chamberlain was a Baptist missionary who came in Bengal, India in 19th CE. He was a devout Christian and a philanthropic. He disseminated Christianity in the remote villages of Bengal. He fought against the evil practices in Hindu society. He upholds the people of rural Bengal of the dark of ignorance to the light of logic and rationality. He conversed natives in Christianity. He devoted all his life for the welfare of the people of Bengal. Even he died in this country. This article will unfold his unheard stories of his journey.

Keywords: *Christianity in Bengal, Baptist missionary, Srirampore mission, Idolatry, Katwa*

The history of Christianity in India is very ancient. The advent of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in 1498 was followed by the coming of the Catholic missionaries in Malabar coast of India. With the permission of Mughal emperor Akbar, they settled in Hooghly in Bengal. Sometimes with permission, sometimes without they started converting the native people in Christianity, until Mughal Badshah Shah Jahan routed them in 1632. Two centuries after this in the second half of 18th CE the Baptist missionaries of the Protestant school came in India. 'Baptism' is a Christian religious rites of sprinkling water on to a person's forehead, which symbolizes purification and admission to Church. To these evangelists the East-ward countries like India was immersed in deep ignorance, superstition, illiteracy and medieval barbaric customs. Only Christianity would give them salvation. Three days after the crucifixion Lord Jesus resurrected. He gave his disciples the command, 'Go ye into all the world, preach the gospel to all men; he who believeth your word will obtain salvation, but they who believe not will fall into hell-fire'.

In 1800 Srirampore Baptist Mission, near Calcutta, was established by Dr. William Carey, Ward and Joshua Marshman. A new age began. Until 1813 missionaries were barred in entering India by East India Company. However, the missionaries continued to use various ingenuous means to arrive in India. Like thus in 1803 a great missionary came in Bengal; Reverend John Chamberlain. His immense effort in propagating Christianity in remote villages of Southern Bengal, his fight against so many evil practices prevailing in Hindu society like in 19th CE like Sati, Idolatry, Ghat Murder, sacrificing child in Ganga sagar, his unwearied urge to explain the true meaning of life to the natives, made him worthy to be introduced to the reader's attention with more than ordinary notice.

Chamberlain was born at Welton in Northamptonshire, on the 24th July, 1777 in a poor farmer family. Due to his ill health his father wanted to make him a mere mechanic or a farmer. But his inert wish was something different. He was a philanthropic by birth. His encounter with great missionary Dr. William Carey and Thomas, reading religious periodicals, sermons prepared him to be a missionary. His worthy master Mr. Haddon perceived the changes of his mind and helped him to be a probationer for missionary undertakings by the committee of Baptist Missionary society of London. After one-year study under Mr. Sutcliff in Olony he was sent to Bristol Academy under the guidance of Dr. Ryland. He engaged himself in studying scriptures nineteen hours in a day. His unrestrained holy zeal, love for souls led him to visit the meanest parts of Bristol. When in 1801 Mr. Ryland asked him if he was willing to go abroad as a missionary. He firmly replied, "I am willing".¹

In April 1802 Chamberlain was declared as a missionary and in May he sailed for India with his wife Hannah. He arrived at Srirampore on 27th January 1803. Here he started his missionary career. He was given the responsibility of preaching in the remote villages of Bengal. His daily journal which was later compiled by his friend William Yates in 'Memories of Mr. John Chamberlain: Late Missionary in India', unfolds a lively account of his long debates with¹ the Hindus about their idols and pujas (festivals), his preaching in the villages, public response and of course so many unhidden stories which focuses the light on the 19th CE Bengali society.

On 8th May 1804 Chamberlain came at Katwa (Cutwa) in stormy night. Katwa is situated on the western banks of the river, Hoogly, in Burdwan, Bengal province. This place still bore the signs of Maharatta- Mughal bloody conflict. He established The Baptist Mission of Katwa. According to 'Religious Intelligence Foreign' in 1810 there were only five Baptist Mission in undivided Bengal- Srirampore, Dinajpur, Sadamahall, Jessore and Katwa. In defining the reason behind choosing Katwa for missionary work William

¹ REV. Cox. F. A, 'History of The English Baptist Missionary Society (1845) Vol-1, Boston, page- 56

Yates said, -in preference to many others containing a large population, we still find that they originated in a combinations of circumstances: it afforded a field sufficiently wide for the energies of one man and at the same time offered itself as the most eligible situation for carrying into effect a plan, which has been formed for the extension and support of the nation. Moreover, it was not possible for every native to come in Serampore to hear the gospel. Some days before a terrible fire engulfed Katwa and causing 27 lives. Next morning, he met the local Brahmans, some were indifferent while some were inquisitive. In caste ridden society like India, Brahmans enjoyed the superior position of all class. They made laws to meet their own needs. Therefore, Chamberlain's first objective was to undermine the Brahminical domination in society. He told, "Hear, Brahman, I will tell you what you do, you put the shudra down and exalt yourselves; such is your pride, you keep them ignorant and take their money, being greedy of gains". One Brahmin asked a very crucial question that when the Sahibs(British) illegally imposed their rule on India, didn't they commit sin? Chamberlain answered, "why do you speak ill of the sahibs? Has not their coming into this country been for your good? Is it not better for you than when the Nabob governed?"² This noble justification of colonialism reminds us Rudyard Kipling's poem, 'The white man burden'. Chamberlain was an ardent fighter against the blind, superstitious, barbaric practices prevailed in Hinduism in 19th century. Hindus were mad upon their idols. He found people of rural Bengal as blind as bats, as insensible as stones. The apostle Paul said, "covetousness is idolatry". Chamberlain asked the natives to flee from idolatry. One day he met some pilgrims who were going Puri to see Jugunnauth during Rath Festival. Chamberlain asked about the logic behind worshiping an inanimate structure like Jugunnauth. He said that dumb icon of Juggunnauth can't do nothing good for its worshippers, because it can't move, it has eyes but It can't see; ears but can't hear, if one pray from morning to evening it cannot, it has nose but can't smell, mouth but can't speak. Therefore, its futile to worship such dumb icon. The natives needed salvation, they should come under the noble shelter of the real maker, savior of the world i.e. Lord Jesus. Similar things happen when he asked an aged woman that why did she gathered flower for a dumb icon. He preached her the dictums of Christianity, the incarnation, life, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension of Lord Christ. The women listened attentively. Her heart filled with joy. The sayings of the Saviour made her cry about her age-long ignorance and promised that she would never bathe in Ganga, the holy river of Hindus. It's not very clear whom Chamberlain first converted. Probably before 1806 he might not be able to baptize anyone. In this regard two letters are very important. The first one was written to Mr. White in 21st June 1806, Where he clearly stated, one person was baptized at Katwa, two others from hence were baptized at Serampore. One of these has since turned back but other two continues with him and give him great comfort. The main obstacle of the natives to embrace Christianity was the expulsion from Hinduism accompanied by the deviation from ancestral property and total boycott from relatives. But there's still hope in Chamberlain's mind. He converted a Vaishnavite Hindu, Kangalee and ²his wife. In later Kangalee became a native missionary. He accompanied Chamberlain from village to village. He also became very close to Jr Carey. He even went England. Undoubtedly this was great success for Chamberlain. From the Katwa(Cutwa) Mission three stations were controlled, these are Lakra Kunda in Birbhum District, Siuri and Berhampur Army Cantonment. After Kangalee, he converted Kangalee's sister Komal, Soorup, one Mukharjya Brahmin, Brindabun. Brindabun became a native preacher. From 1809 Chamberlain regularly visited Berhampur Army Cantonment. Here a church was established. He baptized 30 to 40 soldiers- his labour were now divided the heathen of Cutwa and the European soldiers at the military station of Berhampur. His work was highly appreciated in England. Mr. Fuller wrote a letter to England where he wrote, that Chamberlain appeared to be very diligent and God seems to be blessing his labours". He traveled in the inert villages of Burdwan and Birbhoom district, gathered people under a trees and preached parts of testaments, ten commandants and so on. Gradually rural folks got interested in Christianity. Chamberlain's heart filled in joy in the prospect of salvation of the native brethrens, when he said Cutwa, having forsaken their idols, their dabbitas, taken refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ. He preached in Bengali language. Dr. Wiiliam Carey's Bengali grammar book helped him immensely to learn Bengali. He founded schools at Katwa, consisting 40 children. He knew western education would awake the natives from deep slumber of ignorance and enlighten them to fight against superstitious beliefs. Local people started coming in his house to hear Gospels. But the situation was not amiable in every times. Orthodox Brahmans created obstructions in his preaching by shouting "Hurry bol", followed by hisses, clappings, shouting, throwing dust on him. On 2nd November 1907 on way from Dewanganj to Katwa he witnessed the most dreadful custom of 19th CE Bengal, the practice of 'Suttee' (also spelled as Sati). He saw that a woman was about to eat fire; and at the ghaut, the dhol or drum, was sounding the death-peal. some of them called out him in triumph; but he was seized with such horror, that he could not see the dreadful sight. the people laughed at the idea of the poor creature's wallowing in fire, and called it 'a show' Seeing his mastery over indigenious languages, his infatigable zeal and his adherence to religion the Serampore Mission urged him to visit Agra for the translation of scriptures. Here he worked with Mr. Peacock. In this fifteen month he was engaged in translation work, preaching among the soldiers in the fort and the natives. He translated scriptures in Brij-Bhasa (a language of Northern India) and Hindi. But due to a complain that his preaching would create hostility among the natives he was sent back to Calcutta by the East India Company. Ignoring his health here he devoted himself in preaching wherever and whenever is possible. In 1821 lungs infection arrested him. He was forced to leave his beloved work. He sailed for England. In 6th December on the way this great soul took his last breath. A monument was erected on Circular Road Baptist Chapel in Calcutta with great respect. The following lines are written in epitaph, - Sacred to the memory of Mr. John Chamberlain who, after having devotee with unabated zeal and infatigable labour, nearly twenty years of his life to the propagation of the Gospel among the heathen in India died on the passage to England for the recovery of his health. December 6th, 1821. Lat 9. 30 Long 85. E near the island of Ceylon aged 45 years.

Life was easy not to him. One after one challenges some time made him knelt down. He lost his first wife Hannah which followed by the death of his second wife Mrs. Grant and his children- "I am afflicted with wave upon wave till I am shipwrecked in the midst of the storm. The arrows of the Almighty stick fast in me, and I am consumed with the blow in his hand". But his love for souls, his

² Yates William, Memoirs of Mr. John Chamberlain, London (1826), page 154

devotion to the Lord Jesus wake him up every time with a renewed energy. Conditions of rural Bengal was in no match with the lavish buildings, streets with England. More over its climate, terrible disease like Malaria, Cholera, Black fever was enough to disarm many missionaries for coming in rural Bengal. But Chamberlain belonged to a different pedigree. His friends became wondered thinking how did he exist. He must feed on air. He propagated Gospel in those villages of Bengal whose name were ever heard of, like Dainhat, Deewangunj, Agradwip, Jugadanundapore and so on. He went close to the natives, logically discussed with them about their religion, tried to remove their ignorant beliefs, raised the power of rationalism in them. His constant maxim was “work and life”. No one missionary in India possessed such ardent attachment too missionary labours or showed indomitable courage and zeal as Chamberlain did in service of Lord Jesus³.

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